NINETEENTH CENTURY PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

REMINA SIMA

“Henri Coandă” College, Timișoara

37, C. Brediceanu St, 300446 Timișoara

reminasima@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to illustrate the public and private spheres. The former represents the area in which each of us carries out their daily activities, while the latter is mirrored by the home. Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are two salient nineteenth-century writers who shape the everyday life of the historical period they lived in, within their literary works that shed light on the areas under discussion.*

Keywords: *education, family, public, private.*

1. Introduction

In the United States there was a great expansion of educational opportunities in the period following the Revolution. Education was seen as important for both boys and girls. According to Linda Kerber, this interest in formal education was encouraged by industrial development. She observes that a farmer, for example, could manage without too much education if any at all,

but a boy who wanted to run his own business needed to be able to read and write.

Institutions where boys could study flourished in the early American Republic. The situation was not the same in the case of girls. The reason for this lies far back in the history of Western thought, according to which women's energies were to be devoted exclusively to the service of their families. Educational options were much more limited for girls than they were for boys. According to Kerber, the closing of the literacy gap between American men and women cannot be precisely dated, but she estimates that major improvements in female education were achieved between 1790 and 1830. This was due to the political and industrial revolutions.

The curriculum was not the same for boys and girls:

If learning was intended to prepare young men for active roles in the public sector and for service to the state, the shelter of coverture seemed to make sophisticated learning of little use to a woman. (Kerber 1980:190).

Boys had to study subjects that would help them carry out their activities in the public area, whereas women studied only the basic ones. As a man was considered to be the breadwinner, he had to be prepared for public work; a woman had her universe within her household, so she needed to prepare for activities performed in the private sphere.

After the Revolution, besides their traditional responsibility for taking care of the household, women needed to be informed and virtuous citizens. Kerber states:

she was to observe the political world with a rational eye, and she was to guide her husband and children in making their way to it. She was to be a teacher as well as a mother (1980:235).

2. Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The Awakening has its roots in Kate Chopin's private life, although some literary critics have presented her as "an objective observer who rarely wrote out of private experience" (quoted in Chopin 1994:114). Like Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of the novel, Kate Chopin evinced a desire for independence and solitude. Kate was born in 1850 in St. Louis as the third child in a family of five. Two months after she started at primary school, her father died in an accident. She was therefore brought up by her mother and grandmother, both widows. This period of her life inspired her to write about woman's independence and liberty. She had the opportunity to be well educated by her mother, studying French and the art of music. Kate's mother embodies the figure of the successful woman, as she ran a profitable business on the Mississippi. Her grandmother, on the contrary, embodies the kind of woman who was dependent on her husband and who could not make ends meet after his death.

In *The Awakening* Chopin describes the family life of Leonce and Edna Pontellier, taking her inspiration from her parents' life. Kate's aspirations towards an intellectual life arose from the fact that she had grown up surrounded by educated women in the school where she studied, and also by independent ones who could make their way in life by using their rationality. She became a woman who learned how to manage in life, just as her

mother had done after her husband, Oscar Chopin, died. Edna Pontellier represents Kate's spiritual embodiment. Fragments of the author's private life are present in Edna's life. As a writer, Edna fights against physical and spiritual isolation. Kate Chopin is one of those nineteenth-century women who won the "fight" against the social constraints she faced, helped by a family who guided her through their free and intellectual life.

Despite the difficulties women faced in their desire to assert themselves in the public area, they managed to cross the boundaries of the private sphere, showing self confidence. This was quite difficult, as the nineteenth century was still a period when the ideal role for a woman was considered to be the traditional one, *queen* of the house. However, as I have already mentioned, the educational gap between the two sexes was beginning to disappear in America.

The act of writing becomes liberating. The female writers of the nineteenth century generally present women's inner mood. This has to do with their desire to be liberated from the isolation created by traditional principles. Kate Chopin is one of the nineteenth-century American writers who demonstrated a woman's success in the activity of writing through producing literary works that have remained famous until today. The woman's desire to be independent, to become liberated through the act of writing, stands out in the novel under discussion. There is a close connection between it and the author's mentality regarding life.

The Awakening opens by presenting the husband and wife's roles. Mr. Pontellier is the one who, in a way, governs his wife, Edna, as he represents the family in the public sphere. Edna is presented as the person responsible for their two children and the house, so she is the representative of the private

sphere. Kate Chopin manages to show the nineteenth-century husband's view of the wife's role. She does so by presenting Leonce as an authoritative husband who accuses his wife of neglecting one of their sons, Raoul, who is ill: "If it is not the mother who should take care of the children who else should?" (Chopin 1994:13).

The whole novel focuses on Edna's desire to make her way into the public area. She wants to assert herself socially. She feels the need to do something that could satisfy the spiritual part of her life; this is the need for the creative act. Edna is the kind of woman who does not fit into the traditional frame. This is evident from her discussions with Adele Ratignolle, a mother as well, but one who follows the tradition. Adele devotes all her time to the family (e.g. she keeps knitting clothes for them even during her visit to Edna). Mrs Pontellier is the opposite of this lady; she loves her family, but she also wants to assert herself outside the house. Her whole life seems to be a protest against the traditional canon. All through the novel we are presented with this theme of tradition versus non-tradition. Tradition is represented by Mrs Ratignolle, non-tradition by Edna. The protagonist of the novel is the only female character who enjoys autonomy and independence. This novel is not against the family as an institution, but against a tradition that ascribed specific roles to men and women. Edna starts painting when she is alone. The creative act makes her feel contented and fulfilled. She is glad when she starts to achieve her position in society as a human being, and her relationship, as an individual, with the outer world. The end of the novel presents the end of the protagonist. We see her in crisis and resorting to suicide. As she swims out into the sea, getting farther and farther from the shore, she becomes tired. She thinks

of her husband and children, who will no longer be able to believe that they govern her person and soul. Edna's most outstanding characteristic is the fact that she has a strong and unflinching determination to follow her beliefs.

As already mentioned, I would also like to make reference to a short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman was a well-known American sociologist and feminist who experienced the traditional role of a wife. She fought for women's economic independence and their access to education. Perkins said that, economically speaking, men are thousands of years in advance of women. This may seem a little exaggerated, but it is a fact that men govern this field. Gilman said that all beings lack independence and depend on other factors; for example, animals depend on food and man depends both on animals and on other food.

Women were economically dependent on men in the nineteenth century, but men were also dependent on their wives. Their activity in the public sphere was due, to a certain extent, to the atmosphere created in the household, the private area. What Perkins wants to show is the fact that in the house the woman is not the employee and the husband the employer. The latter should not see his wife as a person "employed" to fulfil his needs in an area that he cannot take care of, but rather consider her a life partner. The two were created to help each other. Women's work in the private sphere gives men the chance to produce more in the public one; women, by taking care of the domestic chores, offer men the opportunity to function successfully in their fields of activity. Thus, in an indirect way women do take part in the outer life of the private sphere.

By means of her writings, Gilman tried to show that a woman is a

human being who can assert herself in the public area if she is educated and well-informed. She wanted to encourage women to be economically independent. She herself, who had enjoyed independence, began feel disappointed after her marriage, as she realized that from then on her liberty would be restricted and that her right to coordinate her life had become almost nonexistent. She experienced a serious breakdown and finally decided to see a doctor. It is interesting to observe that the doctor was a man. It was he who would make the decisions for her. The author tells us how she was treated by this doctor. What revolted her was his advice. He suggested that she should lead a natural life. From his perspective that meant that she should fulfil the traditional role of a wife. She was strongly advised against reading or against any exertion of her intellect. If she persisted in this activity, it was not to occupy more than two hours a day. From this it is clear enough that in the nineteenth century women could not share their cultural needs with the opposite sex. Charlotte tells us that the solution to her problem was exactly what the doctor told her not to do: the act of writing. This is how the short story under discussion came to be written. This work changed the doctor's mentality, but unfortunately, he did not admit that he had taken the point.

One of the topics that pervades this text is masculine domination. John dominates his wife when it comes to taking decisions. He is a doctor and is characterized as a practical man. He does not believe in the creative act of imagination, which he considers to be of no value, and this is why he cannot understand his wife, who has experienced a breakdown. She is convinced that intellectual work will make her feel right again, but she can engage in it only in a furtive way. From this we understand that female literary work was

not given proper credit at the time. On the one hand we have John, an intellectual, who is a doctor and has an active professional life; on the other hand we have his wife, whom he advises to be passive as regards intellectual activity, as this is what caused her breakdown. The paradox is that it is this kind of activity that helps her recover from her terrible condition (Gilman 1998: 35)

The wife is fully dominated by her husband. This is evident at the level of the sentence. The conjunction *but* seems to appear in an obsessive way and it belongs to John. The text is highly polyphonic. Although the doctor wants his wife to recover, he stresses his authority by taking her to live temporarily in a place that dominates her spiritually. Apparently the house is presented as an ordinary one. However, the way it is described resembles the position of women in the nineteenth century. The bars on the windows suggest isolation, more than the direct association with a prison does. In such a state was the woman of that time when her access to education and culture was limited. She could only occupy the little “prison” of her household without any perspective on the outer world. This was an isolation that most women were not even conscious of, as it seemed to be the norm. This is evident in the case of John’s sister, who embodied the ideal housewife and who did not even think of having a job (Gilman 1998:36). In the room in which John’s wife lives there is yellow wallpaper that is torn off the wall. The wallpaper dominates the room as the soul dominates the body. This colour is full of symbols. It is the colour of rebellion, of escape. This is another theme that will in the end prevail over the first. In this way the domineering character becomes the one dominated. The wallpaper becomes unbearable for the protagonist, and

at first she wants to change it at any cost. The same is true of her spiritual state and she wants to change this just as desperately. The creative act can save her. She is a woman who is characterized by the desire for a cultural life. We are talking about some yellow wallpaper, nothing special at first sight. The subtextual interpretation, which is very strong, refers to her desperate need to escape, an idea that is represented by the female figure that the woman can see behind the wallpaper. She “fights” behind the “wall” that separates her from liberty. This action takes place at night, as that is the only time when the “fight” can be effective. This is a symbolic way of showing that at that time in history, a woman could only find her liberty furtively, without being seen by anybody. The woman of the nineteenth century becomes liberated through the act of art, which she performs when she is not being observed.

This is shown by the example of our protagonist, who writes when she is alone. The end of the short story clearly demonstrates this woman’s victory. After a hard fight she manages to cross the traditional boundaries that did not allow her to be herself. The yellow colour suggests masculine power and action. It is the high, thick wall that stands between man and woman. On one side of the wall is the powerful man who wants to dominate everything; on the other side of the wall we have the feeble, sensitive woman. The wall seems to be unyielding, but the woman is determined to tear it down, so she uses all her strength to achieve this. Her struggle takes place at night, as during the day it could be considered irrational. The crawling at the end symbolizes freedom, movement, and action. The situation in nineteenth-century France was almost the same as in the United States. After the French Revolution, writers of different political convictions and religions debated on the best education for

girls in a new era. Erna Olafson Hellerstein mentions (in *Victorian Women—A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France and the United States of America*) three of these writers: the Evangelical Calvinist Albertine Adrienne Necker de Saussure, the Roman Catholic bishop Felix Antoine Ph. Dupanloup, and the anti-clerical republican Tullerie Fouillee.

Necker de Saussure was known in France as a supporter of progressive education. She suggested that the intellect of women should be cultivated in order to make them better wives and mothers. Hellerstein records that Necker de Saussure argued “for a rigorous division of public and private spheres, and in the name of family, tranquility and social stability justified woman’s continued subjection within marriage” (Olafson 1981:61). However, Necker de Saussure did not consider that girls should be educated exclusively for a domestic role.

Hellerstein also states that by midcentury the centre of debate had shifted from the private sphere to the public one. Necker de Saussure, as a religious person, believed that God had created man and woman equal. A man should not only see the role of wife in a woman, and in the young girl he should not see only a future wife. There are so many gifts bestowed upon women that have no relation to the role of a wife. A woman, by means of education, can support herself, can have a job without being dependent on men. Felix Dupanloup too encouraged the education of women. He considered that it was women’s duty, not only their right, to cultivate their intellect. “It is a duty in women to study and to instruct themselves, and the intellectual labour ought to have its separate part assigned to it, amongst their own special

occupations and obligations” (quoted in Olafson 1981:65).

Augustine Fouillee also played an important role in the advancement of women’s education. He said that women had an important role in children’s education; “[...]many industrious men owed the qualities that made them outstanding to their mothers’ example” (quoted in Olafson 1981:67). He stated that women who had the chance to study subjects such as sciences and mathematics became famous, but unfortunately not all women could do so at that time.

3. Conclusion

The nineteenth century displays women’s desire to cross the boundaries of the private sphere so as to assert themselves in the public area. They managed to achieve this through education. It was by no means easy, as any non-traditional activity was seen as unnatural. The human soul has no female gender, so we may say that women face the same cultural needs as men. The woman of the nineteenth century felt the need to make her voice heard in the public sphere, to make her contribution to society in a range of fields of activity. My aim in this paper has been to show women’s development in terms of education during the nineteenth century. From then onwards, they asserted themselves in public in a more and more visible way.

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